DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 804 CG 021 292

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TITLE Conflict in Families of Adolescents: The Impact on Cohesion and Power Structures.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 37p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence (2nd, Alexandria, VA, March 25-27, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Conflict; *Family Problems; *Marital Instability; *Parent Child Relationship; *Power Structure

ABSTRACT

Family-related conflict has been a central focus of theory as well as research on adolescent development, both with respect to the characteristics of nature of conflict and the influence it has on adaptational outcomes. Conflict in families of adolescents was studied by examining three characteristics of family conflict (locus, content, and frequency) and changes in family cohesion and power in response to conflict. Using a clinically derived figure placement technique, 460 subjects including parents and 11- to 20-year-old adolescents represented their family twice, as it was typically and in an important conflict situation. Subjects were also interviewed about the nature of the conflict. At a descriptive level, conflict in both marital and parent-adolescent dyads was frequently reported, and conflict over deviant behavior was described in addition to more mundane issues. Across adolescence, reports of parent-adolescent conflict increased, especially those related to autonomy. In general, conflict decreased cohesion and changed power relations in the representations of family structure. In particular, compared to others, conflict in the marital dyad was related to decreased cohesion and increased cross-generational coalitions, whereas conflict between mothers and adolescents was related to shifts in power. Both cross-generational coalitions and reverse power hierarchies were portrayed more often in conflict concerning deviant behavior. No gender differences were found. (Author/ABL)

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Conflict in Families of Adolescents: The Impact on Cohesion and Power Structures

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CG 021292

This research was supported by grants from the Stanford Center for the Study of Families, Children, and Youth, and the Swiss Government. The authors are grateful to Alan Kanner and Martin Ford for their critical reading of an earlier draft of this paper. Reprint requests may be sent to T. M. Gehring, University of Zurich, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Freiestrasse 15, CH-8028 Zurich, Switzerland, or to S. S. Feldman, Center for the Study of Families, Children, and Youth, Building 460, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2135.

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Abstract

Conflict in families of adolescents was studied by examining (a) three characteristics of family conflict -- locus (the most involved dyad), content, and frequency, and (b) changes in family cohesion and power in response to conflict. Using the FAST, a clinically derived figure placement technique, 460 subjects including parents and 11 to 20 year-old adolescents represented their family twice, as it was typically and in an important conflict situation. Subjects were also interviewed about the nature of the conflict. At a descriptive level, conflict in both marital and parent-adolescent dyads was frequently reported, and conflict over deviant behavior was described in addition to more mundane issues. Across adolescence, reports of parent-adolescent conflict increased, especially those related to autonomy. In general, conflict decreased cohesion and changed power relations in the representations of family structure. In particular, compared to others, conflict in the marital dyad was related to decreased cohesion and increased cross-generational coalitions, whereas conflict between mothers and adolescents was related to shifts in power. Both cross-generational coalitions and reverse power hierarchies were portrayed more often in conflict concerning deviant behavior. No gender differences were found. Results are interpreted from family systems, developmental, and clinical perspectives.

Conflict in Families of Adolescents: The Impact on Cohesion and Power Structures

Family-related conflict has been a central focus of theory as well as research on adolescent development, both with respect to the characteristics or nature of conflict and the influence it has on adaptational outcomes. For instance, psychoanalytic theories view parent-child conflict as a necessary component of adolescent development and adjustment (see Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). Empirically, researchers have identified important changes in parent-child relationships that occur at puberty, especially in the cohesiveness and power structures of the family (Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg & Hill, 1978). In general, it is known that adolescence is a major transition period that places families at risk for higher levels of stress and conflict. Furthermore, it is a well-documented finding that high levels of family-related conflict, especially marital conflict, adversely affect adolescent functioning. However, despite numerous studies from clinical as well as developmental perspectives, the most important characteristics of conflict and their relationship to family functioning are still poorly understood. Thus, the present study investigated both the characteristics of conflict in families with adolescents and the impact of these characteristics on family cohesion and power.

The consistent and overwhelming conclusion from research on the characteristics of parent-adolescent conflict has been that in non-clinical families, parent-adolescent relations "basically are not stressful" (Montemayor, 1983, p. 85; see also Hill, 1985), and that disagreements typically concern everyday issues such as household chores and homework

(Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Montemayor, 1983). Indeed, most adolescents report that despite arguments with their parents, their family relationships are characterized by closeness, positive affect, and flexibility (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Feldman & Gehring, 1988; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Montemayor, 1983; Noller & Callan, 1986; Offer, 1969) In contrast, studies focusing on the frequency or intensity of family conflict, either in the parent-child or marital dyad, have found high levels of conflict to be related to adverse outcomes in adolescents such as anti-social behavior, immaturity, and low self-esteem (Emery, 1982; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Johnson & Lobitz, 1974; Montemayor, 1983, 1986; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Rutter, 1971).

These two sets of findings pose several issues that need to be addressed before the impact of conflict on family structure and adolescent development can be fully understood. First, despite the mundane nature of most parent-adolescent conflict, it is not known if or how the content of these conflicts is related to family functioning. For instance, do families respond differently to autonomy as opposed to disciplinary issues? Furthermore, it is not known if and how the content of family-related conflict changes as children progress through adolescence. Second, research has not clarified whether all types of conflict have similar effects on the structure of family relationships. For instance, does parent-child conflict have the same adverse outcomes for the family as marital conflict? What is the relative effect of sibling conflict on overall family functioning? Finally, how conflict between one set of family members influences the relationships of other family members is also poorly understood.

Several factors have contributed to these gaps in our understanding of

these issues. In general, most of the empirical literature on family conflict during adolescence is atheoretical (Montemayor, 1983). Thus, conceptual frameworks that can guide systematic programs of research need to be developed. Two methodological factors have also posed problems. First, most studies of marital conflict have typically used clinical samples, whereas investigations of parent-adolescent conflict have studied non-clinical samples. Since little is known about the generalizability of findings from clinical to non-clinical samples, it is difficult to compare the effects of conflict in marital versus parent-adolescent subsystems on overall family functioning. Second, family-related conflict has typically been described and studied at a dyadic level of analysis. Although investigations of family triads have recently been undertaken (e.g., Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Gjerde, 1986; Steinberg & Hill, 1978), there has been a growing recognition that dyadic or even triadic levels of analysis do not capture the complexity of families as a whole (Rabinowitz & Eldan, 1984). Research investigating conflict within the context of the entire family would clearly increase our understanding of many of these issues.

One approach to these problems is to use a systemic perspective that describes the nature and impact of conflict in terms of the structural organization of the family as a whole. Families function as systems in at least two ways. First, relationships within families are interdependent and reciprocal in nature. This implies that individual as well as dyadic behavior can be understood only within the context of the larger family unit. Major family subsystems consist of marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships. Second, relationships among family members are structured in ways that serve to maintain the integrity and balance of the family

system as a whole. A structural approach to family systems suggests that relationships can be described along dimensions of cohesion (i.e., emotional closeness) and power (i.e., status hierarchies) (Broderick & Pulliam-Krager, 1979; Minuchin, 1974). Cohesion and power can be analyzed at different levels of organization (e.g., the entire family system, individuals, dyads, and other subgroupings).

It has been proposed that the maintenance of a strong boundary between generations, such that the parental dyad and the children form two separate subsystems, is crucial for adaptive family functioning (Wood & Talmon, 1983). Thus, in well-functioning families, the mother-father dyad has the most power and is the most cohesive unit relative to other dyadic relationships (Bonacich, Grusky & Peyrot, 1985; Hazzard, Christensen, & Margolin, 1983; Leigh, 1986; Minuchin, 1974). Cross-generational coalitions in which a parent-child dyad is the most cohesive dyad, and reverse power hierarchies in which a child has more coercive power than one or both parents, are two types of family structures that are less adaptive. Indeed, when children become involved in parental conflict, and either power-related or affective characteristics of relationships change to create new family structures, the child's cognitive and socio-emotional functioning tends to be less than optimal (Arnold, 1985; Broderick & Pulliam-Krager, 1979; Gehring, 1985; Haley, 1973; Madanes, 1981; Minuchin, 1974; Teyber, 1983ab).

In sum, studies using a family systems perspective suggest that the locus of family cohesion and power and how these family structures change in response to conflict, may be important factors that can help explain the impact of conflict on family and adolescent functioning. From a methodological perspective, a systemic conceptualization of the family also

suggests new ways in which family conflict can be studied. First, a consideration of the family as a system of interrelated parts allows the nature of conflict in different family subsystems to be identified and compared. At the same time, how family structure as a whole changes in response to conflict located in specific family subsystems can also be investigated.

The present cross-sectional research was designed to investigate conflict in families of adolescents. Using a system-oriented approach, we obtained perceptions of family cohesion and power in typical and conflict situations from one member of a family. At a descriptive level, the content of important family conflicts, their frequency, and the subsystem locus of these conflicts was assessed. Three specific questions were addressed: 1. Which of the family subsystems are perceived by parents and adolescents to be centrally involved in important family conflicts? 2. What is the content and frequency of these conflicts for parents of adolescents, and for early, mid-, and late adolescents? 3. What are the effects of family conflict on perceptions of cohesion and power structures in the family and its subsystems?

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 134 parents (67 fathers and 67 mothers) and 326 adolescents (193 males and 133 females) of three age groups from the San Francisco Bay Area. Although only parents with an early adolescent (mean age 11.6 years) were recruited, 34% also had an older adolescent child (mean age 14.1 years). (Parents and adolescents were not necessarily from the same family.) The adolescent participants consisted of 170 6th grade early

adolescents (60% male and 40% female, mean age 11.5 years), 109 9th through 12th grade mid-adolescents (47% male and 53% female, mean age 16.3 years), and 47 first year college students (late adolescents) who did not live at home (59% male and 41% female, mean age 20.1 years). Participants were predominantly White and from intact middle-class families with two or three children.

Procedure

School-aged subjects and parents of early adolescents were recruited via letter through local schools. Sixty-eight percent of the approached parents and 85% of adolescents agreed to participate. All subjects except the late adolescents were part of a larger study and were paid for their participation. The Family System Test (Gehring & Feldman, 1988), hereafter referred to as the FAST, was individually administered twice during a single session. Subjects were asked to represent family relationships as they exist typically (typical representation) and during an important conflict (conflict representation). Afterwards, a brief semi-structured interview focusing on the nature of the portrayed conflict was conducted.

Measures

The FAST is a clinically derived figure placement technique designed to represent spatially the structure of family cohesion and power. The basic materials consist of (a) a 45 cm x 45 cm monochromatic square board divided into 81 squares each, 5 cm x 5 cm; (b) male and female schematic wooden figures, each 8 cm in height; and (c) cylindric blocks of three sizes,1.5 cm, 3 cm, and 4.5 cm. A family representation using the FAST materials is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

To illustrate how cohesion is portrayed with the FAST, the experimenter placed figures close to one another and then farther apart while explaining what this meant in terms of cohesion, that is, "how close family members feel to each other." Subjects were told that they could use any square on the board. Afterwards, the experimenter elevated the figures with blocks while explaining what this meant in terms of power, that is, "the ability to influence other family members." Subjects were informed that the height of the blocks corresponds to the amount of power each family member held and that they could use any number of blocks in any combination, or not at all.

Subjects were first asked to portray the typical cohesion and power relationships in their nuclear family (typical representation). After the representation was completed, the experimenter ascertained who each figure represented and recorded the location and heights of all figures on the board. The experimenter then cleared the board and asked the subjects to represent family relationships in an "important conflict" (conflict representation). The respondent could choose a conflict between any family members, including those that did not include the respondent. Subsequently, the experimenter briefly interviewed subjects about the locus of conflict (i.e., the most centrally involved dyads), its content, and how frequently the conflict occurred.

Scoring the FAST. Cohesion scores were derived from distances between figures on the board. Dyadic distances were calculated using the Pythagorean formula. To generate cohesion scores, each of the distance

scores were subtracted from 12. Thus, cohesion scores ranged from 0.7 to 11, with a large score indicating that family members were perceived as very cohesive. Cohesion scores were calculated for all dyads in the family. In this study, four dyadic scores are reported: father-mother, father-adolescent, mother-adolescent, and adolescent-sibling. Dyadic scores were also averaged to yield three composite measures: parent-adolescent cohesion is the average cohesion score of all cross-generational dyads, sibling cohesion is the average score of all sibling dyads, and family cohesion is the average score of all dyads in the family. When any father- or mother-adolescent cohesion score was greater than the mother-father dyadic score, it was called a "cross-generational coalition."

Power scores were derived from the differences in height between figures. Power differences were calculated for all dyads in the family. As with cohesion, four dyadic scores are reported: father-mother, father-adolescent, mother-adolescent, and adolescent-sibling. Composite scores (i.e., average dyadic scores) were computed for the family as a unit and for parent-adolescent and sibling dyads. A dyadic power difference score of 0 indicates perceived equality in power, whereas higher scores indicate more hierarchical relationships. When a child figure was higher than a parental figure it was called a "reverse power hierarchy."

Cohesion and power shifts in response to conflict were calculated by subtracting cohesion and power scores of the conflict representation from those of the typical representation. Thus, a positive value indicates a decrease and a negative value an increase in cohesion or power.

Psychometric properties of the FAST. Gehring & Feldman (1988) reported psychometric properties of the FAST based on a sample of 267

adolescents. FAST cohesion and power dimensions at the family and dyadic level were found to be near independent (r's ranging from .01 to .19). The family scores showed significant test-retest stability over a one-week period, with greater stability for adolescents (r's = .87 and .83 for cohesion and power, respectively) than for early adolescents (r= .63 for both cohesion and power). Convergent and discriminant validity of the cohesion and power scores was also established using FES cohesion and control subscales (Moos & Moos, 1974) as external validation criteria.

Scoring the interview. During the interview, information was gathered concerning which family members were most centrally involved in the described conflict (the locus of conflict) and the content of conflict. The locus of conflict could be in either the marital, cross-generational, or sibling subsystems of the family. Content of conflict was coded using nine categories: discipline, time, chores, money, autonomy, deviance, marital problems, and sibling fighting. The discipline category refers to conflicts about adherence to rules and appropriate conduct at home and school (e.g., not talking back to parents, school grades) . Conflict over time involves issues of spending time with family and friends (e.g., watching TV, going out with friends). Arguments about chores usually concerned cleaning one's room and keeping things in order. Conflicts over money focused mostly on spending too much or disagreements over priorities for things to buy. The autonomy category includes issues of privacy, freedom, belief systems, or moral values. A conflict was classified as deviance when it concerned physical or mental problems (e.g., physical or drug abuse), lying and cheating, or criminal behavior. Conflicts reflecting general marital problems or sibling fighting were coded as separate categories. When the content of the conflict was

poorly specified or did not fit in one of the above categories, it was classified as miscellaneous.

Categories were derived by first sorting conflicts into general topics. Final categories were established based on (a) the frequency with which topics were mentioned and (b) the correspondence of the topic with those frequently reported in the literature. Coding for each conflict was then done by two independent raters who were blind to subject characteristics. Subsequently, the two raters discussed their classification and resolved disagreements together. Interrater reliability established with a third independent rater showed 80% agreement.

The reported frequency of conflict was coded using three categories. When a conflict occurred 6 times or less per year it was coded as infrequent, 1 to 2 times per month as occasional, and once or more per week as frequent.

Results

The results are presented in two sections. First, the nature of the portrayed conflict is described, and then the relationships between conflict characteristics and changes in family structure are examined.

The Nature of Conflict

Respondents described the nature of family conflict along three dimensions: locus (i.e., the most centrally involved dyad), content, and frequency.

Locus of Conflict. In general, conflict was reported in all of the family dyads, with cross-generational conflicts described most often (50%), followed by marital (35%) and sibling conflicts (15%). No gender effects in reporting the locus of conflict were found. Of particular interest is that cross-generational conflict was depicted in a variety of ways. The majority

of the adolescents (51%) showed dyadic conflicts between themselves and their father or mother. However, 24% showed a conflict of which they were not a part (i.e., between a parent and a sibling), and the remaining 25% showed triadic conflict (e.g., both parents vs one child, one parent vs two children).

The locus of conflict also varied as a function of the age of respondents, (χ^2 (6)=46.3, $p < .001$). Analyses were carried out first comparing early adolescents and parents of early adolescents (χ^2(2)=11.65, $p < .01$), followed by comparisons of the three adolescent groups (χ^2(4)=40.8, $p < .001$). These analyses revealed that early adolescents depicted fewer cross-generational conflicts and more sibling conflicts than did either parents or older adolescents. Also notable is the elevated incidence of cross-generational conflict in mid-adolescents. Internal analyses of this age group revealed that 11th and 12th graders showed parent-adolescent conflict more often than did 9th and 10th graders (79% vs 61%) (χ^2(1) = 4.3, $p< .05$). Thus, reports of cross-generational conflicts increased from early to mid-adolescence and reached its peak by the end of high school.

Insert Table 1

Content of Conflict. Respondents reported a diversity of conflicts. The distribution of responses reflected major concerns with discipline (18%), use of time (16%), chores (11%), autonomy (10%), and marital problems (10%) (see Table 2). As in previous studies, these findings suggest that the content of family conflict is typically centered around a variety of everyday issues. Of greater interest, however, is the finding that subjects mentioned deviance

issues such as lying and substance abuse almost as often as other specific types of issues. Thus, non-trivial issues were important sources of conflict even in non-clinical samples of parents and adolescents.

The frequency with which the various conflicts were described varied as a function of the age of respondent (see Table 2), but not gender. For instance, as judged by the modal response, parents mentioned conflict over discipline most often. Early adolescents reported conflicts over discipline and time most often whereas mid-adolescents reported time and autonomy issues most often. As might be expected, reports of autonomy-related issues increased with the age of adolescents. In fact, from early to late adolescence, reports of conflicts over autonomy increased significantly from 3% to 23% ($\chi^2(2) = 26.5$, $p < .001$). However, these issues still comprised only one-fourth of the conflicts mentioned by mid- and late adolescents.

In general, the conflict described by older adolescents tended to be more idiosyncratic and multi-dimensional than those described by others, as evidenced by the large percentage of responses categorized as "miscellaneous." These findings are not surprising given the increased exposure to a variety of new values and experiences that typically occurs for this age group. It is also interesting to note that both early adolescents and parents of early adolescents did not differ significantly in the content of conflict reported. However, because these subjects were not from the same family, conclusions about within-family parent-child agreement cannot be drawn. Indeed, other research suggests that parent-adolescent agreement may be fairly low (Feldman, Wentzel, & Gehring, 1988).

Insert Table 2

Locus of Conflict by Content. The content of conflict was also significantly related to the locus of conflict ($\chi^2(10) = 52.4$, $p<.001$) [2]. Of particular interest is the finding that the content of cross-generational conflicts was generally well-specified, whereas conflict in marital and sibling dyads was not. Specifically, descriptions of cross-generational conflict focused mostly on discipline (27%), use of time (22%), autonomy (15%), and chores (15%). In contrast, 25% of those reporting conflict in the marital dyad described the content simply as "marital problems." Similarly, conflicts between siblings were poorly described, with 50% of the responses indicating simply that the conflict was about "fighting." When the content of sibling conflicts was specified, it focused most often on chores (12%). The most frequently specified content of marital conflict was money (18%) and deviance (14%).

These findings suggest that family members are better able to identify and articulate cross-generational conflicts than others. It is possible that because the maintenance of strong cross-generational boundaries is important for adaptive family functioning, parents and children have a history of dealing with conflicts involving each other, and thus, can discuss them accurately. Ambiguous descriptions of marital problems may reflect, for example, either defensive responses from parents or a lack of understanding of marital problems on the part of adolescents.

Frequency of Conflicts. The reported frequency of conflict was related to the locus of conflict ($\chi^2(4) = 41.5$, $p< .001$), but not to its content. Specifically, conflicts were described as occuring frequently in cross-generational (46%) and sibling dyads (65%). In contrast, there was no

clear consensus as to the frequency of marital conflicts (40% vs 30% vs 30% for infrequent, occasional, and frequent, respectively). There was a modest gender difference, with males reporting conflict as occuring somewhat more often than females ($\chi^2(4) = 6.4$, $p < .05$).

In sum, these descriptive results suggest that in families of adolescents, conflict is reported frequently in both cross-generational and parental subsystems. Moreover, the content of these conflicts is typically focused on everyday, mundane issues. Although gender differences were generally not found, the locus and content of conflict varied as a function of the age of respondent.

The Impact of Conflict on Family Structure

To assess the impact of conflict on family structure, we examined how the perceptions of cohesion and power changed from the typical to conflict representations. The data are presented in three sections. First, results for conflict in general are presented. Second, we examined how these changes are related to specific characteristics of the conflict - namely, locus, content, and frequency. Finally, the effect of conflict as a function of age and gender of the informants is presented.

In this section, both dyadic scores and composite scores were used for analyses involving representations of cohesion and power. Analyses of parent-adolescent and adolescent-sibling cohesion and power were limited to dyadic scores involving the respondent. This was done so that a distinction could be made between results for mother-adolescent and father-adolescent conflict and to enable direct comparisons of locus of conflict with cohesion and power shifts in specific dyads. [1]

General Effects of Conflict. The most consistent effect of conflict was to

decrease cohesion in the family as a whole. In conflict situations, family cohesion decreased for 82%, increased for 10%, and remained the same for 8% of the sample. In contrast, conflict had a more variable effect on the portrayal of power relations; power differences in the family as a whole increased in 40% of the representations, decreased in 38%, and remained unchanged in 22%. Furthermore, respondents depicted more cross-generational coalitions and reverse power hierarchies in conflict than in typical representations. Specifically, in the conflict representation, cross-generational coalitions increased from 15% to 32% ($\chi^2(1) = 36.8$, $p < .001$) and reverse power hierarchies from 8% to 19% ($\chi^2(1) = 23.3$, $p < .001$).

Characteristics of conflict and their relationship to changes in family structure.

Three characteristics of conflict were considered - locus, content, and frequency. Since frequency of conflict was unrelated to changes in family structure, only the data for locus and content of conflict are presented. Subjects who portrayed either cross-generational conflict that did not involve them or conflicts involving three or more family members were excluded from the subsequent analyses.

Locus of Conflict. To assess how conflict between different family members was related to shifts in cohesion and power, a series of chi-square analyses were carried out separately for each dyad. The data for cohesion shifts are presented in Table 3, and for power shifts in Table 4.

Insert Table 3 here

As shown in Table 3, the locus of conflict significantly influenced cohesion shifts in two of the four dyads. Of special interest is the finding that conflicts in the marital dyad were perceived to decrease cohesion between fathers and mothers cohesion ~~decreased~~ more often than conflict in any other dyad. Cross-generational coalitions (not shown in Table 3) were perceived to increase more often during conflict in the marital dyad than during other types of conflict (33% vs 9%) ($\chi^2(1)=31.7$, $p<.001$). However, when the conflict was not centered in the marital dyad, father-mother cohesion was more stable (i.e., less likely to decrease) than cohesion in other dyads. This latter finding was expected given the role of parents in providing family stability.

Locus of conflict also influenced power relations, as shown in Table 4. Specifically, power differences between mothers and fathers were perceived to decrease more often during mother-adolescent conflict (52%) than during other conflict. Internal analyses revealed that this result was primarily due to the frequent perception of fathers' loss of absolute power within the family. Also during mother-adolescent conflict, power differences between adolescents and their siblings were more likely to increase (53%), primarily due to the perception of sibling's loss of power. It is interesting to note that in both cases, the family member not involved in the conflict was perceived as most likely to lose power.[3]

Insert Table 4 here

In summary, locus of conflict was related to changes in family structure.

Both cohesion and power between parents varied as a function of the family members involved in the conflict. Father-adolescent and sibling relationships were also responsive to locus of conflict but only in one dimension of family functioning. Finally, mother-adolescent relations changed in response to conflict in ways that were unrelated to who was involved in family conflict. Of equal significance, however, is the general finding that the effects of conflict were not limited to the family members involved in the conflict but were evident in every dyad.

Content of conflict. The content of conflict was related to changes in the patterning of family structure. Specifically, respondents who described conflict over deviance issues were more likely than others to portray cross-generational coalitions (57% vs 34%; χ^2 (1)=6.15, $p < .02$) and reverse power hierarchies (36% vs 15%; χ^2 (1)=8.12, $p < .001$). Shifts in cohesion and power were not related to the content of conflicts. Thus, it appears that deviance issues are related to qualitative shifts in family structure, but not to fluctuations in cohesion and power relationships per se.

Characteristics of Respondents and their Relationship to Changes in Family Structure.

Age. Cohesion and power shifts in response to conflict were unrelated to the age of subjects. However, as with content of conflict, there were age effects in relation to the patterning of family structure. Specifically, in comparing typical and conflict representations, late adolescents showed smaller increases than other respondents in their portrayal of cross-generational coalitions and reverse hierarchies (see Table 5). It is noteworthy that this result derives from late adolescents' relatively high initial rates of these patterns in typical representations.

Insert Table 5

Gender. Gender effects were absent for shifts in cohesion and power, cross-generational coalitions, and reverse power hierarchies.

Discussion

The systemic framework adopted for this research is based on the assumption that the behavior of one family member or the functioning of a single family dyad can have a profound and pervasive effect on the functioning of the family as a whole. Thus, in contrast to previous work on family-related conflict, this assumption required that our approach include the possibility that family conflict can influence adolescents even when it is not centered in the parent-adolescent dyad. As a consequence, we were able to demonstrate the rich and complex nature of family structures with respect to specific types of conflict. Our findings are limited to parents' and adolescents' representations of the family. As such, they represent subjective realities that are undoubtedly influenced by factors such as age, experience, and personality. However, individual perceptions of family relationships are based on abstractions of experience over time and thus, at least in part, also represent the reality of family life.

Although descriptive and correlational in nature, the results of this research suggest several new conclusions about conflict in families with adolescents. From a developmental perspective, our research suggests that the locus of important conflict varies as a function of age of respondent, with more mid-adolescents and parents of early adolescents mentioning cross-generational conflict and more early adolescents mentioning conflict

in the sibling dyad. In addition, our results suggest that reports of autonomy-related issues increase with age of adolescent. These results reflect the process of individuation and parent-child conflict typically associated with adolescent development. Of greater significance, however, is the general lack of developmental differences in our data with respect to cohesion and power shifts in response to family conflict. It is possible that cohesion and power reflect structural mechanisms of family functioning that allow flexibility and change in family relationships regardless of the age or stage of development of family members. Because such a conclusion is tentative given the cross-sectional nature of this study, these findings clearly deserve further investigation.

Of general interest are results suggesting that although conflict between parents and adolescents was mentioned most often, conflict in marital and sibling subsystems was also reported by a significant number of respondents. In fact, approximately one-third of the respondents mentioned conflict in the marital dyad as an important family conflict. This is especially significant given that all respondents were from intact families. These findings suggest that an exclusive focus on the parent-adoelscent dyad is inadequate for understanding the role of family conflict in the lives of adolescents. Moreover, such a focus fails to acknowledge the important impact that conflict in any dyad in the family can have on the functioning of the family as a whole. For instance, marital conflict was associated with cross-generational coalitions more often than other types of conflict. Clearly, marital as well as sibling relationships represent important sources of family-related conflict that should be considered in future research with adolescents.

Similarly, studies in this area have generally failed to assess the extent to which conflict in non-clinical families is similar to conflict in less adaptive families. That our subjects mentioned deviance issues almost as often as any other type of conflict is significant in this regard. Moreover, respondents depicted cross-generational coalitions and reverse power hierarchies more often in conflict situations. These findings are consistent with those from research on clinical samples as well. Thus, non-trivial issues are important sources of conflict in "normal" families, and less than optimal changes in family structure take place in response to conflict even in non-clinical samples of parents and adolescents.

The results describing the impact of conflict on family structure pose several unresolved issues. The first concerns the significance of dysfunctional family structures during "typical" family functioning as opposed to, or in addition to, its role during conflict. It is possible that a dysfunctional structure in the typical representation of the FAST indicates more problematic functioning than similar patterns in response to single conflicts, especially if we assume that the typical representation is a mental averaging across everyday situations. Conversely, it is possible that representations of conflict reveal true family structure whereas typical representations depict idealized or otherwise distorted perceptions of the family. In other words, conflict and related stress may not change family structure but rather, reveal the "true" nature of family cohesion and power. To resolve these issues, factors such as a family's overall level of conflict and general response to a variety of conflicts on a day-to-day basis need to be investigated.

In addition, as might be expected, all types of conflict were generally

related to a decrease in cohesion in all family subsystems and in the family as a whole. However, the meaning of increases or a lack of change in cohesion needs further clarification. For example, an increase in cohesion may indicate "enmeshment" or maladaptive types of attachment, especially when it occurs in the conflict dyad. On the other hand, if the marital dyad becomes more cohesive during a parent-child conflict, this may indicate that the parents work together to cope with this type of conflict.

The impact of conflict on power structures was more differentiated, with increases in power being as likely as decreases. On the one hand, these changes could be indicative of various problem-solving and communication styles that develop during conflict situations. Thus, increases in individual power might reflect the use of authoritarian decision making where one person has primary authority. Decreases in power might reflect more interactive, authoritative problem-solving styles, whereas no change could indicate a relatively rigid style of functioning. Alternatively, subjects may have depicted various phases of conflict. If so, decreases in power might indicate the early stages of conflict whereas increases might reflect conflict resolution. In addition, the role of personal definitions of power requires further clarification. For instance, power can reflect coercion, legitimate status, or the use of a specific strategy to gain control. These definitions may vary as a function of age and which family members are involved in power struggles.

Clearly, an understanding of the meaning of changes in family structures requires more in-depth and focused research. Whether our findings reflect structural changes that are typical of conflict in general and whether some of these changes are more adaptive than others should be the focus of future

research. Nevertheless, the present study has demonstrated the utility of a systems approach for studying conflict in the family. First, the nature of conflict in various family subsystems could be identified and compared. Second, conflict in single family dyads was shown to have pervasive effects on the family as a whole. Finally, differential effects of family conflict on cohesion and power relationships in specific family dyads could be identified.

Footnotes

[1] Analyses using only composite scores were also conducted yielding comparable results.

[2] "Miscellaneous" conflicts were omitted from these analyses. Because "marital problems" and "sibling fighting" are content categories that also reflect a locus of conflict, they were also omitted.

[3] It was also possible that changes in family structure were dependent on the nature of cohesion and power as represented in typical situations. A series of additional analyses were conducted to assess this possibility. Although based on small and unequal cell sizes, the results are noteworthy. First, decreases in cohesion in response to conflict were perceived for most respondents regardless of how cohesion was portrayed in the typical representation. However, if low cohesion was reported in the typical representation it was more likely to be evident in the conflict representation. For power, results were dependent on the locus of conflict. For instance, if husband-wife relationships were typically perceived as egalitarian, they tended to remain egalitarian during conflict; perceptions of husband-dominant relationships in typical representations became more egalitarian in conflict representations. The effect of mother-adolescent conflict on mother-adolescent power relations was unrelated to power as portrayed typically. In contrast, father-adolescent power relations during conflict were highly similar to those portrayed in typical situations.

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Table 1

Locus of Conflict as Reported by Parents and Adolescents of All Three Age Groups (Data in Percentages)[1]

	Locus of Conflict		
Respondents	Marital Dyad (N=161)[2]	Parent-Adolescent Dyad (N=230)	Sibling Dyad (N=69)
Parents (n=134)[3]	38	52	10
Early Adolescents (n=170)	38	36	26
Mid-Adolescents (n=109)	23	72	5
Late Adolescents (n=47)	38	53	9

[1] Percentages represent all conflicts, including those involving more than two family members.

[2] N = number of conflicts of this type.

[3] n = number of subjects per group.

Table 2

Content of Conflict as Reported by Parents and Adolescents of Three Age Groups (Data in Percentages)

		Respondents			
Content of Conflict	Total (n=460)	Parents (n=134)	Early Adol (n=170)	Mid-Adol (n=109)	Late Adol (n=47)
Discipline	18	28	17	13	9
Time	16	13	18	20	9
Chores	11	13	13	7	11
Money	9	11	9	6	11
Autonomy	10	6	3	19	23
Deviance	8	11	7	6	6
Marital Problems	10	5	13	9	13
Sibling Fighting	9	11	15	1	4
Miscellaneous	10	5	7	18	15

Table 3

Decreases in Cohesion in Different Dyads as a Function of Locus of Conflict (Data in Percentages)[1]

	Locus of Conflict				
Family Subsystem	Marital Dyad (N=163)[2]	Father-Adol. Dyad (N=61)	Mother-Adol. Dyad (N=58)	Adol.-Sib Dyad (N=67)	χ^2 (3)
Father-Mother (n=349)[3]	77	54	48	43	41.2***
Father-Adolescent (n=349)	76	69	79	52	16.6**
Mother-Adolescent (n=349)	63	75	81	70	ns
Adolescent-Sibling (n=305)	62	58	63	70	ns

[1] Analyses excluded subjects who portrayed parent-adolescent or adolescent-sibling conflict that did not involve them, or described conflict involving three or more family members.

[2] N = number of conflicts of this type.

[3] n=number of subjects per group.

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Table 4

Power Shifts as a Function of Locus of Conflict and Dyad (Data in Percentages)[1]

	Locus of Conflict				
	Marital Conflict (N=163)[2]	Father-Adol Conflict (N=61)	Mother-Adol Conflict (N=58)	Adol-Sib Conflict (N=67)	$\chi^2(3)$
Father-Mother Power Shift (n=349)[3]					
Decrease	36	18	52	27	
Increase	26	28	22	20	
No Change	38	54	26	53	20.6*
Father-Adolescent Power Shift (n=349)					
Decrease	36	38	53	37	
Increase	29	31	24	24	
No Change	35	31	22	39	ns
Mother-Adolescent Power Shift (n=349)					
Decrease	33	43	40	28	
Increase	37	26	33	23	
No Change	31	31	28	49	12.0+
Adolescent-Sibling Power Shift (n=305)					
Decrease	27	29	8	24	
Increase	23	29	53	21	
No Change	50	42	39	54	21.5*

[1] Analyses excluded subjects who portrayed parent-adolescent or adolescent-sibling conflict that did not involve them, or described conflict involving three or more family members.

[2] N = number of conflicts of this type.

[3] n = number of subjects per group.

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .001$

Table 5

Percentages of Cross-Generational Coalitions and Reverse Power Hierarchies as a Function of Age[1]

	Parents (n=97)	Early Adolescent (n=146)	Mid-Adolescent (n=68)	Late Adolescent (n=37)	χ^2 (3)
Cross-Generational Coalitions					
Typical	12	15	15	26	
Conflict	31	29	36	32	
% Increase	19	14	21	6	8.85*
Reverse Power Hierarchies					
Typical	8	0	9	32	
Conflict	15	11	24	34	
% Increase	7	11	15	2	9.13*

[1] Analyses were based on responses from subjects who depicted conflict in the marital dyad or who portrayed themselves as being involved in conflict in the parent-adolescent or sibling dyad.

* $p < .05$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. FAST representation of cohesion and power in a family with five members.